

Perspective Piece

Successful Global Health Research Partnerships: What Makes Them Work?

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Abstract. There are many successful global health research partnerships, but little information is available about what makes them successful. We asked 14 research colleagues from Uganda, Kenya, and the United States who have extensive global health research experience about what they considered the top three factors that led to or impeded successful international research collaborations. Four key factors were identified: 1) mutual respect and benefit, 2) trust, 3) good communication, and 4) clear partner roles and expectations. Initial and ongoing assessment of these factors in global health research partnerships may prevent misunderstandings and foster a collaborative environment that leads to successful research.

INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have seen an explosion of interest and funding in global health and a dramatic increase in global health research partnerships between institutions in high-income and low- and middle-income countries.¹ However, there is limited practical information about what factors specifically lead to a successful global health research partnership.^{2–5} To gain perspective on this issue, we sought the collective wisdom of research colleagues with extensive global health research experience. We asked five global health research colleagues from Uganda, three from Kenya, and six from the United States to list “the top three factors that lead to successful international collaboration, and the top three factors that impede international collaboration, based on your experience.” All the research colleagues were faculty at a university or research institution, and all had more than 10 years of global health research experience. Together, the researchers have more than 200 person-years of global health research experience in children and adults.

Although the questions were open-ended, responses were highly consistent, so the factors listed by colleagues were grouped into categories. Four key factors were identified independently by at least eight of the 14 researchers as essential to successful global health research partnerships: mutual respect and benefit (11 researchers: 6/8 African, 5/6 the U.S.); trust (10 researchers: 6/8 African, 4/6 the U.S.); good communication (9 researchers: 4/8 African, 5/6 the U.S.); and clear partner roles and expectations (8 researchers: 6/8 African, 2/6 the U.S.). Individual comments on each factor are included in Table 1.

MUTUAL RESPECT AND BENEFIT

African and the U.S. researchers heavily emphasized mutual respect and benefit as important to a successful global health research partnership. Specific comments on factors (Table 1) noted the importance of collaborators as equals, with similar goals, motivation and moral values, and development of a

reciprocal long-term relationship. Comments on the factors that could impede success focused on lack of respect, generally lack of respect for the non-low-income country partner, and were sometimes pointed, for example, “a colonialist approach to research,” and “a paternalistic attitude (“I know what’s good for you”), usually from the Western (high-income country) party.”

Comments on mutual benefit emphasized a collaborative relationship and equity for both parties, including equity in training opportunities. A specific comment noted that “using the sites to advance the U.S.-based researchers’ careers” impeded success in global health research partnerships.

TRUST

Trust was also strongly emphasized by African and the U.S. researchers as important to success. Comments in this area focused on transparency and a common agenda. Hidden interests, lack of mutual trust, and lack of accountability were viewed as impediments to success.

GOOD COMMUNICATION

Good communication was noted as important to success by some African researchers (4/8, 50%) and most of the U.S. researchers (5/6, 83%). Comments here focused on communication skills, with the lack of these skills or miscommunication viewed as impediments to a successful global health research partnership.

CLEAR PARTNER ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS

Clear partner roles and expectations were noted as important to success by most African researchers (6/8, 75%) but by a minority of the U.S. researchers (2/6, 33%). Recommendations in this area focused on having the same vision and mission, having clear expectations at the start of collaboration, and planning early with site principal investigators for future studies.

PUTTING THE KEY FACTORS TO WORK

At first glance, the broad categories of factors critical to successful global health partnerships identified by the U.S. and African researchers may seem both obvious and

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TABLE 1

Factors essential for success in international research partnerships

Mutual respect and benefit
Joint and collaborative relationship with both parties benefiting*
Respect for differences at the partner sites
Equal partnership
Benefit to the careers of all
Significant convergence of interest
Addressing needs of both partners
Collaborator as an equal, with the same goals, motivation and moral values
Equity of training opportunities for both partners
Reciprocal and long-term relationship that can navigate healthy debate and disagreement
Impede success†: colonialist approach to research; imbalance in influence or perceived influence; using the sites to advance the U.S.-based researchers' careers; know-it-all attitude by either party or lack of recognition of capacity existing in either party; paternalistic attitude (know-it-all, I know what's good for you of one of the parties, usually the Western party)
Trust
A generous spirit (being willing to give others the benefit of the doubt)
Transparency
Common/shared agenda
Impede success: divergent unclear or hidden interests; sketchy ethics or hidden agendas; one-sided agenda; lack of mutual trust scientifically and financially; accountability/lack of transparency)
Clear roles and expectations for each partner
Same vision/mission
Integration of local and international scientists
Clarification of expectations and contributions of each party at the start of the collaboration
Early planning or involving local site at proposal stage
Strategic planning of the future with site principal investigators
Impede success: inequity, disagreements on emoluments, and work plan
Communication
Communication skills
Scheduled site visits
Impede success: miscommunication or poor communication

*Comments listed below factors are verbatim comments from researchers surveyed.

†"Impede success" sections note specific comments regarding lack of the specific factor impeding successful international research partnerships.

nonspecific. These factors are arguably important to any successful partnership. So, does this expert opinion on factors critical to successful global health research collaboration provide useful advice?

We believe it does. In retrospect, we wish that the list of key factors and the specific comments made were available to us at the start of our global health research careers. Indeed, reviewing these factors even now, well into our research careers, highlighted areas for improvement and helped us to understand potential problem areas in our ongoing partnerships.

The simple iteration of four clear areas to consider at the start of any project or partnership forces one to think about these areas, and how one might achieve the desired goals in these areas. The individual comments also provide specificity for each factor. As one example, a concern is attitudes of the U.S. researchers that come across as know-it-all, colonial, or paternalistic. The U.S.-based researchers should consider this concern. Do I come across as know-it-all? Is this project really mutually beneficial? Will it benefit the local population? Do funding and paper authorship primarily benefit the U.S. researcher?

Both parties should consider issues of trust. Is the project run transparently? Is each side willing to give the other side

the benefit of the doubt when there are disagreements or project problems? How can each side do this without compromising the quality of the study or their own standards? How can differences be resolved when there is not a clear path toward mutual agreement? How can partners work toward a mutually agreed upon agenda? How can partners make sure that projects are mutually beneficial, when pressures or rules from funding agencies, academic institutions, and other involved parties may work against mutual benefit?

Answering these questions honestly at the start of a partnership and working toward solutions for problem areas may prevent numerous difficulties in the years to follow. The differences in emphasis between African and the U.S. researchers in the consideration of good communication (more noted by the U.S. than African researchers) and clear partner roles and expectations (more noted by African than the U.S. researchers) as key factors may indicate potential "blind spots" in need of attention.

We asked our colleagues for their list of factors that impeded or led to successful international research partnerships in global health because we wanted to glean their wisdom on this topic. We felt that this informal questioning would provide us with initial, open information that a more systematized survey might not. The results were indeed more down-to-earth and practical than those of some previously published articles on this topic: mutual respect and trust were emphasized in several articles,²⁻⁴ but the importance of good communication and clear partner roles was less well articulated. We hope that our findings provide a starting point for comprehensive and systematic future studies of what makes global health partnerships work.

Our expert African and the U.S. research colleagues have told us that mutual respect and benefit, trust, good communication, and clear partner roles and expectations are critical to a successful global health partnership. A careful review of these areas may be useful not only to researchers starting global health partnerships, but also to those in long-standing global health partnerships, as with this "compass," they can assess where their current projects and partnerships stand in each area and modify practices when necessary to maximize success in each area.

We plan to assess these factors in our current studies, and hope that they provide a framework for others to conduct more in-depth evaluation of the components and attitudes that lead to successful global health research partnerships. Ultimately, attention to these factors should lead to mutually beneficial and satisfying research partnerships that result in better health for the populations served by these studies.

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